Ailing Doctors' Journal May Die

Trade group seeking an outside publisher

By Carl T. Hall
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The California Medical Association may pull the plug on its respected but financially ailing Western Journal of Medicine unless an outside publisher can be found.

The association, which represents about 36,000 physicians, recently warned that mounting deficits threaten to kill the venerable monthly, which first appeared in 1897 as "California Medicine."

Officials blamed rising postage and printing costs and a continuing drought in pharmaceutical ads. Until recently, the journal was given to dues-paying CMA members and distributed to out-of-state medical societies for a nominal charge.

Recently, the San Francisco-based trade group has been trying to sell subscriptions to doctors for $35 a year, hoping a large list of paying subscribers would make the journal appealing as a business proposition.

But the drive had netted only 1,270 doctors as of last week — far short of the goal of 9,500 subscriptions by May 30.

The journal is one of the only peer-reviewed publications focused on front-line clinical practice.

Recent articles have covered the occupational injuries of bartenders and issues surrounding death and dying. By comparison, most other elite journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association emphasize biochemistry and basic scientific research.

While the Western Journal has earned high marks from doctors, the CMA says only a few physicians have been willing to pony up what it will take to cover chronic financial losses. Dr. Jack Lewin, executive vice president of the medical association, said the CMA has had to subsidize the publication to the tune of $500,000 a year.

That won't continue past July 1, he said. Foundation contributions kept the journal going during the past year, but now the plan is to make the journal self-sufficient — or else cease publication.

The association's goal is to increase paid subscriptions and get an outside publishing firm to improve marketing and sell more ads. The CMA would continue to handle editorial functions.

"We're doing everything we can to keep it alive," said Dr. Linda Clever, the journal's editor.

Officials have been prospecting among outside publishing concerns. At least two companies have expressed an interest in taking over marketing and sales.

George D. Lundberg, editor of the Chicago-based Journal of the American Medical Association, noted that state and regional medical societies have had difficulty "securing a large enough readership base to attract sufficient revenues."

Independent publishers might yet be found to take on the Western Journal, which benefits from a strong regional base and a relatively wide-ranging editorial focus. But that will happen only if it can pass muster as an advertising vehicle.